

## Small Town, Grand Plans The Silverton, Colorado, NHL

*Silverton Historic District NHL, San Juan County, CO. Silverton Town Hall, with its distinctive silver-domed bell tower, is on the town's main street. Destroyed by fire in 1992, the building was restored by the Town of Silverton and the San Juan County Historical Society. Photo by Roger Whitacre, June 1996.*

**T**he number of people living within a National Historic Landmark (NHL) district apparently has little to do with its success. Last year, the NHL district of Silverton, Colorado (population 720) received \$400,000 in preservation funds from the state, \$24,000 from the National Park Service (NPS), \$120,000 from a local mining company, and \$60,000 from the "Friends of the San Juan Skyway." Also within the last year, the San Juan County Historical Society—Silverton's only preservation group—took ownership of the historic Mayflower Mill, as part of a multi-million dollar land donation. The NHL also completed a district boundary study and the \$1.9 million restoration of its fire-damaged town hall, the latter project garnering awards from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Colorado Preservation, Inc., and the NPS.

This would be a lofty list of accomplishments for any preservation group. The fact that the San Juan County Historical Society has no paid staff, and less than 300 members—only 80 of whom live in town—make these accomplishments even more impressive. Silverton is also in one of Colorado's least populated areas, a mountainous region so remote that the town was inaccessible for nearly a week last winter when snow slides closed the single highway leading into it. How do they do it? One society member says simply: "Somebody has to be there to preserve things." It's that attitude that has characterized the San Juan County Historical Society since its inception.

The historical society began in 1965, four years after Silverton became a NHL. Silverton was founded in 1874, following the discovery of silver in the San Juan Mountains. The area was also rich in gold, lead, and copper, and Silverton soon became the center of the extensive "San Juan Triangle" mining district. Silverton's economy

remained mining-based until 1992, when the Mayflower Mill closed.

Unlike Aspen and Telluride, which may now be better known for their snow conditions than their mining history, Silverton does not have a ski industry. It also does not have gaming, like the NHL Colorado mining towns of Cripple Creek, Black Hawk, and Central City. Insulated from these development pressures, Silverton has retained a high degree of historic integrity, and



looks very much as it did during its mining heyday.

The San Juan County Historical Society's first project was a museum. In 1965, the society leased the town's historic jail (at one dollar a year for 99 years), and transformed the building into a museum. Next, the society acquired the town's two historic railroad depots. The Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, which connects the towns of Durango and Silverton, was also designated as a NHL in 1961. In 1966, the Denver & Rio Grande Western (D&RGW)—which then owned the railroad—closed its Silverton depot. When the D&RGW then announced plans to demolish the depot, the San Juan County Historical Society asked if they could have the building. Soon thereafter, the Silverton Northern Railroad depot was also donated to the society.

"Here we were, with two railroad depots, and no uses for them," recalls one society member. Making matters worse, the D&RGW depot was bombed in 1975. (The bomber was never identified, although many suspect it was a disgruntled railroad employee.) No one was injured, but one end of the building was destroyed.

Retrospectively, San Juan County Historical Society board member Fritz Klinker sees the dynamiting of the depot as a catalyst. "It made us ask ourselves if we were really serious about preserving buildings," says Klinker. The Society accepted the challenge, and repaired the depot. The Society then resorted to a creative "rent credit" plan that allowed tenants to move into the two depots rent-free in exchange for preserving the buildings.

In 1981, D&RGW sold its Durango-Silverton route to Charles Bradshaw, who restored regular passenger service on the line. As a result, the newly formed Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Line needed a depot. Bradshaw leased the depot from the Society, and eventually purchased it for \$50,000. "It's probably the only depot that was purchased *back* by a railroad," says Klinker. Soon thereafter, the society sold the Silverton Northern depot for \$45,000. (The society maintains exterior and interior covenants on both depots.) "The depots launched us into the business of real estate

inception. The society hired a Durango architect to design a new building that was compatible with the NHL district, with plenty of input from historical society board members. Remarkably, according to board member Beverly Rich, "there was not a single disagreement throughout that whole process—even down to the paint color and the design of the drawer pulls."

That level of cooperation extended to the archive's construction, as board members rolled up their sleeves and did much of the finish work. Even the operation of the archive remains an all-volunteer effort, as board member Allen Nossamon donates his time as the archivist. Completed in 1993, the archive is also the headquarters of the San Juan County Historical Society.

On November 30, 1992, just as the archive was nearing completion, disaster struck when Silverton's historic town hall was devastated by fire, triggered by a newly installed heating unit designed to melt snow on the roof. The building was so badly damaged that town officials considered razing it, but the historical society lobbied for its preservation.

A 1990 NHL Condition Assessment Report prepared by the NPS Rocky Mountain Region—which highlighted the building's architectural and historical importance—also persuaded town officials to restore rather than raze the landmark. Indeed, Silverton Town Hall now serves as a national model for restoration projects. In the aftermath of the fire, while the embers were still hot, townspeople carefully preserved every salvageable building element: metal ceiling panels, woodwork, light fixtures, and decorative plasterwork. What couldn't be salvaged was studied, analyzed, and replicated.

"We did the bulk of the restoration work with locals, but whenever we needed expertise we sought out the best," says Klinker. Town officials,

acquisition," says Klinker, "and gave us the cash to do other projects." Klinker believes the depot acquisitions also gave the society the knowledge, experience, and confidence to take on new projects.

With the \$95,000 from the depot sales, the San Juan County Historical Society moved onto its next venture: an archive. The preservation of Silverton's historic photographs, papers, and manuscripts, then stored in the basement of the town library, had been a dream of the society since its

acquisition, society members, and the building contractor attended national restoration conferences and consulted with experts. Specialists from Colorado State University's Center for the Stabilization and Reuse of Important Structures lent technical expertise. Conservators who worked on Mount Vernon and other NPS projects were consulted on the plasterwork restoration, and a New York-based consultant analyzed the building's stonework for the repair of the fire-damaged north wall.

*Silverton Historic District NHL, San Juan County, CO. In June 1996, Sunnyside Gold Company handed over the keys for the Mayflower Mill to the San Juan County Historical Society. Befitting Silverton's small-town atmosphere, the ceremony was held in the park, with music provided by the town's brass band. Photo by Roger Whitacre, June 1996.*



The Silverton Town Hall project made it easier for the NHL to gain additional funding. "Organizations that give money always look at a community's track record," notes Klinke. "They look to see if you've done what you said you were going to do. And they also look to see if you did it in a satisfactory manner, following Secretary of the Interior's guidelines." Apparently, the State of Colorado found the Town Hall restoration to be more than "satisfactory." In 1997, the state's his-

The historical society received an additional \$60,000 for its mill tour program via the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). In 1997, the "Friends of the San Juan Skyway"—a region-wide, non-profit group that includes Silverton—received a \$500,000 ISTEA grant to interpret that scenic route. Of that award, \$60,000 was earmarked for the Mayflower Mill.

"The more successful we've gotten, the more people support us," says Rich.

As an example, a former Silverton resident presented the society with an endowment that has now grown to \$40,000 and is used to maintain the town cemetery. The historical society is also not shy about asking for help. Two years ago, the society asked NPS for help to expand the district boundaries to include the cemetery and the Mayflower Mill. Working under the supervision of the Rocky Mountain Support Office, graduate student Dawn Bunyak prepared a nomination that expanded the National Register boundaries. Following the preparation of a national context for 20th-century milling operations, the

NHL boundaries may also be expanded.

What future preservation projects are in store? "Most of our projects began with idle conversation that turned into a 'What if?'" says Klinke. Among the "What if's" now being discussed is a plan to extend the railroad line to the Mayflower Mill. Society volunteers are also seeking tenants for the other historic buildings included in the Mayflower Mill land transfer. The society also wants to convert a historic boarding house into a mining museum. The San Juan County Historical Society has been collecting historic mining equipment for over 30 years. "We now have one of the premier mining collections in the world," says Rich, "and we need a place to showcase it." Based on its track record, Silverton will probably turn all of these plans into reality.

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*This house in Silverton Historic District NHL displays the pride of its builder despite the town's isolation. Photo by Russell Lee. Reproduced from the collection of the Library of Congress.*



toric preservation fund awarded the NHL \$400,000 for additional restoration work. The innovative techniques used to repair town hall's north wall will now be used on the remaining three walls which, over time, have been damaged by weather, acid rain, and coal smoke. A 1997 NPS Challenge Cost Share grant will also go toward the building project.

In 1996, the San Juan County Historical Society took on its biggest project yet: the Mayflower Mill. Since 1929, the Mayflower Mill had been the economic mainstay of the community, and its 1992 closure raised concerns about the future of the historic mill buildings. Through a complicated land transfer that required the approval of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Sunnyside Gold Company donated the mill and 80 acres of land to the historical society. "The stereotype of small town historical societies is a bunch of 'little old ladies' collecting quilts," says one board member. "We collect industrial buildings." In June 1997, the society began offering daily tours of the mill, and Sunnyside Gold Company provided \$120,000 to help build that interpretive program.